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SENATORS WARNED TO KEEP SECRETS

Helms Controversy Prompts a Letter to Lawmakers on Intelligence Disclosure

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 17 — The Senate Republican and Democratic leaders formally warned their colleagues today that Senate rules prohibited disclosure of intelligence information obtained from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence or any other sources.

The warning, sought by the intelligence committee, was made in a letter to each senator from Howard H. Baker Jr., Republican of Tennessee, the majority leader, and Robert C. Byrd, Democrat of West Virginia, the minority leader. They noted that Senate Resolution 400, which set up the intelligence committee, barred disclosure without committee approval of intelligence material obtained from the committee or any other source.

The letter was prompted by a written request from the chairman and vice chairman of the intelligence committee, representing the unanimous views of committee members. This request, made in a hand-delivered, "eyes only" letter that is now in the committee's safe, cited disclosures by Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, about the role of the Central Intelligence Agency in the presidential election in El Salvador.

Mr. Helms has vehemently denied he disclosed information obtained from the intelligence committee. He has said he got his information from sources in El Salvador.

Undermining Confidence

The letter sent today said: "The appearance that details of proceedings before the intelligence committee or sensitive information before the intelligence committee are being discussed in open session on the floor, or in any other manner not authorized by S. Res. 400, cannot help but undermine the mutual confidence that must exist between the committee and the intelligence community if congressional oversight of intelligence activities is to be effective."

It cautioned: "If any senator receives information about alleged intelligence activities from sources other than the intelligence committee, he or she should bear in mind that such information may well be classified and the subject of the committee's oversight. Accordingly, he should seek the advice of the committee before making any public comment."

Senators Barry M. Goldwater, Republican of Arizona, committee chairman, and Daniel P. Moynihan, Democrat of New York, vice chairman, said in their letter that although they cited the conduct of Mr. Helms there was no conclusive evidence that he had violated Senate rules, according to those familiar with the letter.

However, Mr. Helms's conduct was severely criticized at a meeting at which Mr. Goldwater and Mr. Moynihan showed the letter to the Senate leaders, according to those familiar with the meeting.

"He certainly did an extraordinary thing," one committee member said of Mr. Helms.

Mr. Helms said today that he had started a Senate Ethics Committee inquiry to determine who leaked the Goldwater-Moynihan letter to The New York Times, in violation of the Senate rules. He charged Mr. Moynihan with the leak because, he said, Mr. Moynihan was supporting Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. of North Carolina, a Democrat who is seeking to unseat Mr. Helms in his campaign for re-election this fall.

"Senator Moynihan is again playing politics, and that's all it is," Senator Helms said.

Aid to Presidential Candidate

Senator Helms disclosed on the Senate floor last week that the agency had given to the campaign of José Napoleón Duarte "comprehensive, across-the-board services," including money for precinct organizers, radio and television advertisements and computer vote registration.

Mr. Helms said that he received this information not from the committee but from a radio broadcast in San Salvador.